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A NOTE ON *Hamlet*

In his *Two Notes on Hamlet*, in *Mod. Lang. Notes*, XXIX, 1-3, Dr. Joseph Quincy Adams, Jr., attempts to explain the passage:

*Hamlet*: For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god<sup>1</sup> kissing carrion,—Have you a daughter?

*Polonius*: I have, my lord.

*Hamlet*: Let her not walk i' the sun: conception is a blessing, but not as your daughter may conceive. Friend, look to't.

*Hamlet*, II, ii, 181-185.

He suggests that Hamlet here refers to the king as the sun, giving as support for his conjecture the earlier line spoken by Hamlet, "I am too much i' the sun," which he takes to mean, "I am too much in royal favor, or in the royal presence." Hamlet, he believes, intends seriously to warn Polonius against the king, "that adulterate beast," thinking his uncle quite capable of seducing Ophelia.

This explanation is, I think, strengthened if we consider the early wide-spread belief in impregnation by the sun—a belief that has left a record in folk-tales and, to some extent, in other literature. Such stories must undoubtedly have been known to Shakespeare's contemporaries. The whole matter has been fully discussed from the point of view of primitive custom by Hartland<sup>2</sup> and by Frazer.<sup>3</sup> It is necessary here to cite only a few illustrations of the legend.

A story popular in Italy and Sicily narrates that a wizard foretold to a king that his queen would bear a daughter who would be impregnated by the sun in her fourteenth year. When the daughter was born, every precaution was taken to prevent her exposure to the sun. She was shut up in a tower into which the sun could not penetrate. One day, however, the girl scratched a hole in the wall with a bone obtained from her food, and the sun shone on her. A daughter was born to her as the result.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Adams reads *good*; in the light of the following note *god* is preferable.

<sup>2</sup> *The Legend of Perseus*, 1894; *Primitive Paternity*, F. L. S., 1909-10.

<sup>3</sup> *The Golden Bough*, II; *Balder the Beautiful*.

<sup>4</sup> *Perseus*, I, 99.

A similar legend is told of a Japanese maiden. While she lay sleeping by the shore of a lagoon, into her body "the rays of the sun drove like the shafts from a celestial bow," and in due time she became a mother.<sup>5</sup> The original form of the story of Danae it is supposed was due to this belief.<sup>6</sup> The incident appears in several European *märchen* which are variants of the Danae story. Somewhat similar is a Siberian story which tells of the daughter of a Khan who was secluded in a dark iron house, with only an old woman to attend her. One day the maiden asked the old woman where she went so often, and was told that there was a bright world outside in which her father and mother lived, and many other people. The girl then said, "'Good mother, I will tell nobody, but show me that bright world.'" So the old woman took the girl out of the iron house. But when she saw the bright world, the girl tottered and fainted, and the eye of God fell upon her and she conceived."<sup>7</sup>

Such stories occur also in China, where they are especially connected with the mothers of distinguished emperors. They are found in Samoa, among the Admiralty Islanders, the North American Indians, and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> The *Navaho Origin Legend* tells of the birth of a son to Estsánatlehi. She lay on a bare flat rock, with her feet toward the east and let the sun shine upon her. Later she said to her sister, "I feel . . . the motions of a child within me. It was for this that I let the sun shine upon me." After the child is born, he seeks for his father, the sun. After many difficult tests, the sun recognizes and arms his son, who returns to the earth and overcomes the enemies of his people.<sup>9</sup> "Among the Algonkin Indians there is a myth of the earth maiden who becomes a mother when looked upon by the sun. She gives birth to a daughter who is called Wakos ikwe, the fox woman. In time Wakos ikwe gives birth to a great hero, the benefactor of aboriginal man in America, the food-giver."<sup>10</sup>

This belief in the power of the sun is connected with the seclusion, in some countries, of girls at puberty. In New Guinea "daughters

<sup>5</sup> *Primitive Paternity*, I, 25.

<sup>6</sup> *The Golden Bough*, II, 37; *Primitive Paternity*, I, 25.

<sup>7</sup> *The Golden Bough*, II, 37.

<sup>8</sup> *Primitive Paternity*, I, 25.

<sup>9</sup> W. Matthews, *Navaho Legends*, 1897, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah Curtin, *A Journey in Southern Siberia*, 1909, p. 305.

of chiefs, when they are about twelve years of age, are kept indoors for two or three years, never being allowed under any pretence, to descend from the house, and the house is so shaded that the sun cannot shine on them.”<sup>11</sup> This practice seems to be illustrated in the story of Déirdre. I quote from a literal translation, made by Douglas Hyde, of a version found in a Belfast MS.<sup>12</sup> “copied at the end of the last or the beginning of the present century . . . from a copy which must have been fairly old”:

“As for the girl, Conor took her under his own protection, and placed her in a moat apart, . . . Afterwards Déirdre was being generously nurtured by Lavorcam and (other) ladies, . . . until she grew up a blossom bearing sapling, and until her beauty was beyond every degree surpassing. Moreover, she was nurtured with excessive luxury of meat and drink that her stature and ripeness might be the greater for it, and that she might be the sooner marriageable. This is how Déirdre’s abode was (situated, namely) in a fortress of the Branch, according to the king’s command, every (aperture for) light closed in the front of the dun, and the windows of the back (ordered) to be open. A beautiful orchard full of fruit (lay) at the back of the fort in which Déirdre might be walking for a while under the eye of her tutor at the beginning and the end of the day.”<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps more interesting as giving firmer basis to the belief that this old superstition was common knowledge in Shakespeare’s day is the fact that Spenser made use of it in describing the birth of the twins Belpheobe and Amoret to Chrysogonee:

But wondrously they were begot and bred,  
Through influence of th’ hevens fruitfull ray.  
As it in antique bookes is mentioned.

. . . . .  
Upon the grassy ground her selfe she layd

. . . . .  
The sunbeames bright upon her body playd,  
Being through former bathing mollifide,  
And pierst into her wombe, where they embayd  
With so sweet sence and secret power unspide,  
That in her pregnant flesh they shortly fructifide.

<sup>11</sup> *Balder*, I, 35.

<sup>12</sup> The text is edited by Douglas Hyde in *Zeit. f. Celt. Phil.*, II, i, 142.

<sup>13</sup> *A Literary History of Ireland*, p. 306.

Miraculous may seeme to him that reades  
 So strange ensample of conception;  
 But reason teacheth that the fruitfull seades  
 Of all things living, through impression  
 Of the sunbeames in moyst complexion,  
 Doe life conceive and quickned are by kynd:

*The Faerie Queene*, Book III, Canto VI, VI-VIII.

Probably many other literary records could be found of so widespread a folk belief. Shakespeare must have been familiar with the superstition. Moreover, in folk custom and ritual the king, or ruler, was so often spoken of as the sun<sup>14</sup> that had Polonius been on the alert to receive practical advice from Hamlet, he must easily have seen the import of the warning.

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#### MILTON'S USE OF THE FORMS OF EPIC ADDRESS

There is a curious fact concerning Milton's use of the forms of epic address that, so far as I know, has not previously been noticed. There is a temptation to regard salutations like "Daughter of God and man, accomplished Eve," "Offspring of Heav'n and all Earth's Lord" as poetic conventionalities. But Milton's use of them is more subtle. So long as Adam and Eve are sinless in the garden, they address one another with this heroic courtesy. But the minute they taste the apple, they become plain "Adam" and "Eve" to each other, and so remain to the end of the story. The unfallen Adam can address his guilty spouse as the

Fairest of creation, last and best  
 Of all God's works,

still recognizing her as a mirror of the divine idea—to speak in Platonic terms. But after the fatal deed he says more bluntly, "Eve, now I see thou art exact of taste." The poetic effectiveness of this change can be felt at once, though the philosophical explanation of it is more difficult. Perhaps there is some Platonism implicit in it. It certainly is of a piece with the irreverent familiarity that is the first result of the knowledge that has darkened their

<sup>14</sup> *Primitive Paternity*, I, 26.